

For Immediate Release January 19, 2006

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Sens. Brown and Birkholz introduce legislation to protect state parks

LANSING – Legislation designed to protect Michigan's state parks was introduced in the Senate today, said state Sens. Cameron S. Brown and Patty Birkholz.

"Our state parks are a stewardship priority and I appreciate working with Senator Birkholz to protect and preserve our park system for future generations," said Brown, R-Fawn River Township. "Michigan's state parks are a valuable asset. Tourists from all across America come to our state to enjoy our lakes and parks."

Senate Bill 971, sponsored by Brown, would require that the State Park Advisory Committee study any Michigan Department of Natural Resources proposal to sell a state park. Only proposals approved by three-fourths of the committee could be presented to the Legislature.

Brown's bill will prevent the DNR from unilaterally selling a state park – making it a special act requiring approval from the Legislature. There currently is no provision in state law requiring legislative review of any proposal to sell a state park. This legislation will require a review as well as involving the newly created state parks advisory committee in evaluating the merits of any such proposal.

"It is not appropriate to auction off our natural wonders simply because it would put a little more money in the state's coffers," Brown said. "We need a system in place that provides time for a thorough review and opportunity for comments before a state park can be sold."

Birkholz's bill, SB 972, would prevent the DNR from designating land located within a state park as "surplus land."

Currently under Michigan law the DNR is allowed to declare any land it owns as surplus land and put it up for sale.

"Michigan has always taken pride in our natural resources and our state parks system and made them available to all of our citizens and tourists. To jettison those resources, without thorough review, is absurd," said Birkholz, R-Saugatuck Township. "Just as we are trying to preserve our waters for future generations to enjoy, we must ensure that our land also is preserved. Although times are tough economically, the state risks long-term pain for some short-term gain by eliminating quality state parks which add significantly to our tourism mix and generate revenue for our state."

The plan was prompted by recent statements made about the value of selling state parks.

"Michigan's state park system rates among the top in the United States," said Birkholz. "Our parks offer an incredible value to millions of Michigan residents and tourists to learn about, appreciate and enjoy Michigan's natural resources."